

Concord-Alewife Planning Study

Meeting Notes: July 30, 2003 Committee Meeting

Committee Members Present: Jo Barrell, Doug Brugge, Peg Callahan, Pat Goddard, Mitch Goldstein, Chuck Mabardy, Hom Sack, Ann Tennis, Peter White, Al Wilson

City of Cambridge Staff: Les Barber, Stuart Dash, Iram Farooq, Susan Glazer, Taha Jennings, Catherine Preston, Susanne Rasmussen, Beth Rubenstein, Catherine Woodbury

Consultants: David Black, David Dixon, Liz Langley, Ron Mallis, Pam McKinney, Herb Nolan, Christine Scott, Terry Szold

Welcome & Introductions

The next committee meeting will take place on September 10th. Handouts for the evening included the agenda, copy of the presentation, meeting notes from the June 25th meeting, and the first issue of the Concord-Alewife Planning Study Newsletter, which will also be sent to the community.

Review of Land Use Diagrams

A consensus began to develop at the June meeting on the Level 3 Full Plan diagram, with some questions about the steps to get there. The presentation recapped the broader goals and discussed the steps to achieve them.

- *20-30 years from now (the Full Plan):* a mix of uses in the Quadrangle, including housing, commercial/office use, and R&D, with increased intensity within walking distance of the T, more residential uses closer to the Highlands, and a landscaped buffer between the Highlands and the Quadrangle. The public realm would be structured around a network of existing as well as created streets, a strong central public space, and a boulevard. There is interest in encouraging mixed-use development at the shopping center, with housing above retail. Create some activity-generating, community-serving, retail in the Quadrangle without necessarily increasing the total amount of retail in the study area. Also, the full plan is targeted to produce significantly less new traffic generation in the future than would be generated in the future under current zoning.
- *Level 2 (Possible Early Moves):* moves that could potentially happen within the next 10 years include an additional building at the shopping center that brings it closer to the street and creates the opportunity for a better connection with the sidewalk along Alewife Brook Parkway. Within the Quadrangle, the focus is on the center and a strong central green space with connections to Concord Avenue.
- *Level 1 (Base Plan)* – if mechanisms to finance and build the infrastructure and the connection don't transpire as planned – i.e., property owners choose not to take advantage of available mechanisms – it's necessary to have a different set of goals in place. In which case, the area would most likely not be able to support as much development.

It is useful to think of Levels 1 and 3 as two different ends of a spectrum, with Level 2 as a snapshot along the way. The final outcome will probably be somewhere in between.

Committee Discussion:

Perhaps it's not feasible to propose a central open space in a location where significant investment has already happened.

A member of the consultant team noted that they will take a closer look at where significant investment has been made when considering how the elements of the plan should take form on the ground.

Is the connection, which is shown here as spanning the widest part of the tracks, intended to be diagrammatic at this point?

The connection (and its representation and location) is still a concept that needs to be considered. The location is important both in terms of believability and practicality. The larger question of the

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connection will be addressed later in the presentation. It is important to keep in mind that while a connection affords great opportunities, the plan should not rely solely on its being realized.

Is the connection the most expensive element of infrastructure that is being proposed?

Probably. The consultant team will start looking at the costs of open space, different kinds of connections, and roads. It is critical that the investment opportunities are not outweighed by the costs of bringing about the bridge or any other infrastructure.

In Level 3, why doesn't the boulevard extend to the Highlands? Also, why is nothing proposed for the Highlands?

In many ways, the Highlands area is already built-out. There seems to be consensus among the committee that this area should continue to be a livable residential neighborhood, and it would be negatively impacted by a significant increase in the amount of traffic. A pedestrian connection between this area and the Quadrangle is more feasible and is envisioned.

It may be necessary to meet with property owners to make sure that no one's rights are taken away through this process.

It is important to adequately communicate with property owners; however, it is also necessary to keep the process public and transparent. The City has made efforts to increase the forums for property owners to be involved; there is also outreach through public meetings and the newsletter.

How do the economics work to make this plan happen?

The team is exploring methods that will facilitate collaboration between landowners, but it will be necessary to look at a financing mechanism as well. Progress on the plan will be driven by private sector investment; therefore it is critical to think in terms of value enhancement and economic rationale.

Market Analysis

Because redevelopment in this area will result mostly from private sector initiatives, the plan needs to be achievable in the private market. The market analysis, which guides the implementation phase, will require going through the land use plan on a parcel-by-parcel basis to analyze existing, and created value - to test whether the plan is economically compelling.

1. Market for various land uses:

- a. *Rental housing* – The Boston urban market is one of the most desirable markets for rental housing in the nation, and is one of the few markets to have held through the recession. The market features relatively high rents of \$2.50-\$3/square foot for new units and low vacancy rates. Despite an overall softening of the market, this sector is still strong within the multi-family investment market. For places like the Triangle, in the near term, multi-family housing would be feasible. For the midterm, rental housing is likely viable in the Quadrangle, although it may be a little more difficult to do in the near term.
- b. *For-sale housing* – The prices for infill housing are high ranging from \$300-\$800/sf, and significantly higher with amenities. The for-sale housing market has held up well during the recession, mostly due to low interest rates. There is the potential for for-sale housing in the same areas as rental housing as well as along Concord Avenue and within the Quadrangle. The economics of residential development are likely to produce as much if not more value than commercial uses. The frontage along Concord Avenue is a rare amenity and should be an important element in terms of thinking about where and how residential development might occur in the Quadrangle. Profits from for-sale housing could pay for other kinds of enhancements, in addition to covering the cost for land and quality design.
- c. *Office* – The market for office use is presently faltering, despite the fact that prices had been quite high in recent history. Rental rates have dropped, and vacancies are between 5-9%. The market, which is a "tenant market" at this point, is less active. The build-to-suit market seems to be pretty robust, but there is almost nothing happening in

the speculative market, making it harder to foresee office uses in the short term. There is however, some thought from within the industry that things will change in the near future. Furthermore, regardless of why development didn't happen in the study area during the last "boom", it is important to be prepared for the next waves.

- d. *Research & development* – There is an oversupply in the laboratory market right now, which is related to the conversion of underutilized office space.
 - e. *Retail* – The retail market is currently strong. It is important to reposition it in the study area so as to optimize value from the tenant mix.
2. Factors that influence the market:
- a. Location
 - b. Scale and density
 - c. Synergy of uses to share demand
 - d. Infrastructure capacity
 - e. Public realm improvements
 - f. Responsible ownership
3. Factors that influence development feasibility and implementation:
- a. Land control/entitlements, including parcelization that works, entrepreneurial ownership, standards for zoning and approvals
 - b. Development costs, including the cost for land, building/construction, infrastructure, and proffers
 - c. Operating revenues, such as rents, sale prices, and absorption to cover development costs and operating expenses
 - d. Operating expenses that include real estate taxes, real estate operations and other programming
 - e. Financing
4. Specific issues facing each of the subdistricts in the study area:
- a. *Highlands*
How to preserve and enhance the existing uses.
 - b. *Shopping center area*
Can more be done, perhaps through a reconfiguration option that would yield a more vibrant, more synergistic mix of uses and tenants?
 - c. *Triangle*
Triangle has the most valuable location because of its direct access to the T and Route 2, affording it both visibility and access. It has a coherent public realm and infrastructure, with a track record of successful development.
 - d. *Quadrangle*
The Quadrangle is highly visible but has very limited access to Route 2 and the T, which is important to the commercial interests that might constitute the next generation of uses locating there. The issue of cooperation among landowners is also important, because the parcelization is problematic at this point. The plan will need to give parties a reason to cooperate.
5. Market implications for the plan: The plan will have to be compelling to convince those already in the study area and others wanting to invest there. It will have to put zoning in place that sets the stage for cooperation, and it will have to identify first moves that have a high probability of being successful.

Analysis of vehicular connection over the tracks

The consultants noted that no decisions have been made on the feasibility of a connection or what form it would take. Tonight's discussion focuses on the issues related to the feasibility of a vehicular connection across the tracks. The Quadrangle depends solely on Concord Avenue for access. The purpose of an auto connection would be to provide additional access points, enhancing accessibility particularly to and from the north, and reducing circuitous routes. An auto connection could prove

useful in connecting the Quadrangle to Cambridgepark Drive, therefore providing direction connections to Routes 2 and 16. A bicycle/pedestrian crossing would improve accessibility to the T station, and a transit/shuttle connection could help extend transit service into the Quadrangle. There is a general consensus among the committee and the wider public in favor of a pedestrian/bicycle connection, while an auto connection is still being discussed in terms of its potential impacts and benefits

Due to serious safety concerns and the level of activity on the tracks, at-grade crossings do not seem feasible at this time. Although, there are some existing at-grade crossings in close proximity, the MBTA does not appear willing to consider this option. An underpass across the tracks must take into account groundwater conditions in the area, and tend to actually be more severing because of the visibility and safety issues they present. Therefore, a bridge is the most feasible option for a new crossing across the tracks.

However, there is also the potential for traffic other than that associated with the Quadrangle using an auto connection over the tracks. The attractiveness of any vehicular connection over the tracks for non-Quadrangle traffic depends on how direct a connection to Concord Avenue it provides.

Issues that still need to be considered:

1. How a connection impacts land uses in the Quadrangle.
2. Physical space and locational needs for ramping
3. The implementation mechanism
4. Affected land owners
5. Strategies to minimize auto share

Next steps for analysis:

1. Evaluating the potential for an auto connection within the context of the evolving land use plan.
2. Considering the capital costs of a connection and what they would reap in terms of its benefits.

Committee Discussion:

What is potential cost of an auto connection based on costs of other similar bridges?

The width and the distance of the connection help to determine the cost. The price of acquisition of land for the ramping up to the bridge also has to be taken into account.

Is depressing the railroad tracks a possibility?

Grade requirements are so significant that a great distance would be impacted. The rails also need to get back up for the at-grade crossing at Blanchard Road. Furthermore, depressing the rails would probably increase costs because it would require closing tracks while they are lowered.

Introduction to Zoning:

In response to requests made at the last committee meeting, there was a brief presentation on zoning terms and history in Cambridge as well as some of the changes that came about through the recent citywide rezoning process. City staff mentioned that the changes made during the citywide rezoning haven't fully been taken advantage of in this area, particularly in the Triangle, and there is a great potential to rethink things.

A Parkway Overlay District was established to improve the feel along Alewife Brook Parkway and Concord Avenue, by imposing certain design requirements on the lots fronting the parkways, regardless of the base district. There are several instances along Concord Avenue of offices built in the 1980s in accordance with the Parkway Overlay District. However, like rezoning, if the property owner chooses to do nothing and make no changes to his/her property, nothing can be imposed. As a result, the positive changes along Concord Avenue are only present where the property owner wanted to redevelop.

Committee Discussion:

There was some concern that many of the uses allowed in the IB2 zone are more intrusive to the Highlands, even with the lower height restrictions.

Some of the uses that exist in the Quadrangle have been grandfathered in; in other words, they are no longer allowable under current zoning and would have to change if the owner makes any significant changes or improvements. However, a property owner cannot be forced to make changes.

What would happen if the zoning for a parcel needed to be changed?

Changes in the zoning ordinance require 6 of 9 city councilors to approve, with 7 of 9 necessary to pass a zoning amendment if there is significant protest from the landowner. More deference is given when a land use plan exists and is consistent with proposed zoning.

If one of the challenges is bad parcelization, are there any zoning incentives to encourage people to bind together?

Solutions to this challenge were explored in the Triangle, but weren't totally successful. Rather than go through the PUD process, much of the development there occurred through the variance process.

Public Comment:

At the end of the committee discussion, there was an opportunity for the general public in attendance to comment. Comments are summarized below:

Someone asked why the pedestrian bridge over O'Brien Highway that was discussed in the Eastern Cambridge Planning Study was determined to be too costly for the apparent lack of use that it would receive, but a connection is being considered in the Concord Alewife Study. There was some concern that the PUD hypothesis should be tested and a suggestion was made to the committee that it consider establishing definite requirements for public benefits to be written into any PUD recommended by the committee. There was a request that the next committee meeting exclude presentations and provide more opportunities for discussion and committee participation, including representation from Belmont. A concern was expressed about the length of the presentation and how many of the committee members – particularly residents – had left before the public comment portion. There was some concern about the lack of discussion on environmental aspects; given the flood plain in the area. Furthermore, there could be uses – such as a stormwater retention pond – other than buildings that are proposed in the plan.